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Mapping Region: Fort Kochi in Malayalam Cinema

Abstract: Visual representation plays an important role in creating real\ imagined spaces. Though the real space has an ontological essence, it can be mainly perceived only through its various representations. The represented images create a prism which might even blur the boundary between the real and the represented space.

Mapping regions in visual culture has its own politics and poetics. Spaces associated with marginal\ subaltern people are often under-represented or misrepresented. The wide circulation of these visual signs creates stereotypes not only about the region but also about the people and their culture who occupy that space. Heterogeneities, contradictions, polyphonic voices unique to that region are often erased to create a monolithic space.

This paper is an attempt to probe into the politics and poetics of the representations of Fort Kochi in select Malayalam cinema with special reference to *Anwar /Best Actor*. The paper attempts to find out the stereotypes created by cinema about this region and its people. The cultural and social implications of such representations are also looked at closely. Special attention is paid to

the creation of first space, second space and third space (concepts propounded by Edward Soja) in the select films.

The theoretical background of this paper is a site of intersecting discourses. Insights from Spatial Studies, Film Studies, and Subaltern Studies are incorporated in my study.

Key Words: *Best Actor*, Othering, Third Space, Spatial Theory

Visual representation plays an important role in creating real\imagined spaces. Though the real space has an ontological essence, it can be mainly perceived only through its various representations. The represented images create a prism which might even blur the boundary between the real and the represented space.

Mapping regions in visual culture has its own politics and poetics. Spaces associated with marginal\subaltern people are often under-represented or misrepresented. The wide circulation of these visual signs creates stereotypes not only about the region but also about the people who occupy that space. Heterogeneities, contradictions, and polyphonic voices unique to that region are often erased to create a monolithic space. Many major Hollywood Blockbusters are in fact built on the stereotypes concerning the racial other who occupies a different space. The juxtaposition of sky scrapers in New York with the Slums in Harlem serves their vested political and aesthetic agenda.

This paper is an attempt to probe into the politics and poetics of the representations of Fort Kochi in select Malayalam cinema with special reference to *Best Actor*, a Mamooty starrer directed by Martin Prakat, released in 2010. Fort Kochi, and Mattanchery, though, parts of the city are often represented as the eternal other in popular Malayalam cinema. Unlike in Ernakulam where people mainly live in flats, in Fort Kochi and Mattanchery, many people belonging to the lower strata of

the society, live in slum like situations. Because of lack of proper education and other facilities, some people in these regions have taken up odd jobs. Some of them have even joined the quotation gangs which are often used as pawns by the powerful groups in the mainstream. Many recent Malayalam block busters like *Big B*, *Anwar*, *AnnayumRasoolum*, and *Best Actor* have portrayed life in Fort Kochi and Mattanchery in vivid detail. In some of these movies, the entire plot is built on the Eranakulam – Fort Kochi binary which is linked to other larger patterns: the city dweller-the slum dweller, the civilized, the uncivilized, us and them. The aspects of our selves which we refuse to acknowledge are attributed to these people who are othered. Looked at from a psychoanalytic angle, the qualities attributed to them may be our own qualities which are unmarked.

The paper attempts to find out the stereotypes perpetuated and created by the film *Best Actor* about this region and its people. This movie was selected for analysis since it appealed to the larger sections of Kerala viewers, and also because almost all the reviews tended to glorify the film without making any serious attempts to problematise the gross stereotyping from a critical vantage point. This paper intends to initiate critical deliberations on the lack of such critical interventions. The politics and poetics in mapping this region in this film is critiqued. Special attention is paid to the creation of first space, second space and third space (concepts propounded by Edward Soja) in the selected film.

Best actor revolves around a school teacher, Mohan who wants to act in a film. He meets many directors for a chance, and all of them turn him down. A group associated with the new generation cinema tells him that he is not eligible to act in their next film, a crime thriller because of his ‘pavathan’ look, and lack of real life exposure. They told him about the exploits of the Bollywood actor, Vivek Oberoi, which ultimately won him a role in a Ram Gopal Varma film.

Mohan decided to join a quotation gang to learn more about goons, thinking that it would help him to impress the director. At this juncture, the film takes us to Fort Kochi. Even an ordinary school teacher holds that to meet goons in Kerala, he needs to go to Fort Kochi. This association of Fort Kochi with the underworld is a feature that can be seen in many Malayalam films dealing with life in Kochi.

Mohan is the outsider in Fort Kochi. The movie juxtaposes the normal world of Mohan and the supposedly bizarre world of Fort Kochi. Mohan's ferry ride from Ernakulum to Fort Kochi is symbolic of travel from one world to the other. In the first scene depicting Fort Kochi, the camera pans over the dilapidated buildings in the gullies. The juxtaposition of the sky scrapers in Ernakulum with the slum like dwellings in Fort Kochi creates an eerie atmosphere. A group of images consisting of women inveils, unhygienic living conditions, and a goat walking here and there are used to capture the quintessence of the place. A sudden phone call from Mohan's wife is used in the film to remind the spectators of the normal world outside. His wife, a representative of the chaste, loving, modest women class is contrasted with a harlot like figure who intervenes during his telephone call with his wife. The background score during Mohan's stroll through the gullies also builds up the binary division. The music results in further alienating the place and its people.

The goons and their gangs are a constant presence in the scenes depicting Fort Kochi. The clash between such groups is presented as something natural in this part of the world. The blood thirsty gangs are ready to dismember, disfigure and even murder their targets for money. Mohan approaches one gang to join them to learn their art, but he is turned down. Later, he presents himself before another gang leader as a goon from Mumbai underworld. His theatrical skill impresses the gang leader, and he gets a chance to take part in some of their adventures. But, in

one instance, his gang attacks and injures the same director Mohan met earlier. Realising that all his attempts were futile, a dejected Mohan returns home. But, the police come after him since he is one of the suspects behind the kidnapping of Shreekumar, a renowned director. Shreekumar was actually in the custody of Dilber's gang. After listening to the story of Mohan, he decides to direct a movie starring him depicting Mohan's struggles. The film closes with fans under the leadership of Dilber Ashan celebrating the success of the film carrying Mohan on their shoulders.

For analyzing the mapping of the space in this film, I intend using here, the theoretical tools developed by Spatial theory. Edward Soja has put forward the concept of first space, second space, and third space. First space is the "mapping and compartmentalization of space". Second space is "the conceptualization of the first space" by means of art or any other medium. Third space is the "lived space" or "it is the experience of living". The movie *Best Actor* pays minimal attention to the first space. The region is not well constructed in the cinematic space. The second space, the space constructed by the film, is well delineated. Yet, it is problematic since it presents its people as one dimensional. Most of the characters are mere caricatures. They resemble the people in the popular stereotypes. The third space, the lived space, is grossly underrepresented and misrepresented in the film.

Space is linked to larger questions of power. Historically speaking, since time immemorial, human beings, like many other animals have shown an increasing tendency to live together in groups of likeminded people. They developed or cultivated their space in a unique fashion, and hence, over the course of years, space became the defining factor of their cultural nuances. Their identity was linked to the space they themselves constructed.

In the post- globalized world, the rigidities and fixities associated with the constructed space were placed under erasure. Large scale migration to cities created two unique spaces which

became sites of creolization- the flats and the slums. In this film, Ernakulam stands for the city, and Fort Kochi stands for its inferior other, the slum. People belonging to various geographies and cultures are brought together in these spaces. Flats are constructed to house the rich and the elite. They are archipelagoes without bridges or ferries to connect people. Behind the façade of an urbane outlook, they create their own world within the four concrete walls. On the other hand, slums are spaces without boundaries. One's space runs into the other. The scenes depicting the houses in the streets in Fort Kochi are a case in point. There are possibilities of mixing of various kinds. This situation engenders two related, yet mutually exclusive situations. On the one hand, some spaces within slums become truly polyphonic, and on the other hand, some other spaces become political battlegrounds where one's specific identity defines the modalities of one's daily transactions. The second scenario gives people a feeling of shared strength and an equally shared feeling of insecurity. Such situations make showcasing of one's power a survival instinct. The mushrooming of gangs in slums is linked to insecurities created by this insecurity within, and the challenges coming from the regimented, structured world outside. Poverty, lack of employment, drug abuse, institutional oppression, and lack of ownership are some of the other issues which add to their trauma. Though these issues are not paid any significant attention in the film, the gangs and their conflicts in the film makes sense only when placed against this wider socio-political backdrop.

Mainstream narratives have either ignored the other, or created binaries so as to justify our moral position. The representation of colonies and slums in Malayalam cinema is a case in point. These spaces and the people occupying these spaces are often the victims of othering. Wikia defines othering as "a process in which one group is seen as 'us' and another group as 'them' (1)". Because of various socio-political reasons, "it is easier to dismiss them as being in some way less human, and less worthy of respect and dignity" (1). A corollary to this is that large sections of populations

can be “dismissed and hated” (1). Benjamin Franklin effect shows that “we have a startling tendency to come to hate people who we treat badly”. In other words, some people are dehumanized to save us from our guilty consciousness (1). Looked at from this vantage point, we get some clarity for the stereotyping and othering of slums in mainstream narratives like the film *The Best Actor*. Their poverty, their violence, and their struggles are not necessarily part of our life. They are reduced to a spectacle to be enjoyed, to be debated, and then abhorred. Such portrayals are well received by the theatre going community since it exonerates them from the crime of larger systemic violence which has created slums and slum dwellers.

To conclude, Space in visual culture should not be studied in isolation. To gain a larger perspective, it is to be seen as metonymic representation of the quintessence of the larger cultural fabric. Mapping the world has political and racial overtones. Artists like cartographers end up in constructing spaces rather than objectively describing it.

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